

Humble Beginnings

The Catholic Church in Evansville, Indiana

By Brian S. Lankford

Evansville was founded in 1812 by Hugh McGary. It would be another 25 years before the first Catholic church was established in 1837. At that time, there were only a few catholic families but they longed for a priest to celebrate Mass and perform the sacraments. Bishop Simon Bruté recognized the need for a priest in southwestern Indiana. Bruté was named the first Bishop of the newly established Diocese of Vincennes in 1834. Knowing that the Ohio River was an easy mode of transportation for immigrants seeking land in southwestern Indiana, Bishop Bruté sent Reverend Anthony Deydier to Evansville on May 3, 1837 to found the first Catholic church. Father Deydier had the foresight to record the story of his arrival in his own handwriting in the church baptismal record. Father Deydier's personal account in its entirety is as follows:

The first information of any Catholics residing in Evansville was communicated (if I am not mistaken) by the Reverend Mr. Buteux and companions of journey who lodged on their arrival in Indiana at Mansion House of Evansville, corner of Locust and First Street, where they were kindly entertained by the owner, Mr. Francis Linck, a native of Germany, born in 1774 at Stockheim in Wurtemberg, and by his amiable wife, who were themselves the only Catholic family noted by the Reverend travelers to exist in Evansville in the fall of 1836, although some few [...] Catholic church as Mr. John Walsh [...] have been found there even at that period.

Sometime during the following March 1837 the Very Reverend Mr. de la Hailandière, Vicar General for the Right Reverend Bishop accompanied by the Reverend Mr. Shawe (who was one of those who has lodged at Mr. Lincks house being then the only sub deacon now ordained (the first) priest in the Catholic Diocese of Vincennes) came down from Vincennes to Evansville in search of Catholics and may found some on their route. One of the objects however was to obtain a lot for building of a church. [...] would make him a present of a lot for that purpose [...] indeed he and his partners showed themselves ever ready to make their promise good. But the possessions lay at too great a distance from the then inhabited part of Evansville to suit the convenience of the few Catholics who were now beginning to settle either permanently or for a time in the town of Evansville. No conveyance of the promised lot was therefore granted or even demanded up to the present date of March the 2nd 1838.

Things stood thus until during the absence of the Right Reverend Bishop Bruté then attending the provincial council of Baltimore, Mr. de la Hailandière sent to Evansville the Reverend Anthony Deydier with the intention of giving him charge of the Evansville mission.

It was on the third of May, 1837, it being in that year the eve of the Ascension of our Lord, that the new missionary, who reckoned then on 40 days of priesthood, although 49 years of age, reached his destination, toward the fall of night. Upon presenting his credentials to Mr. Linck he was most cordially invited to take his lodgings in the family which offer was accepted with gratitude. The next morning all the Catholics, who were known to live in town being notified of the arrival of a priest, these were gathered from 15 to 20 Catholics, mostly Germans, to assist at the Holy Sacrifice, which was offered in Mr. Linck's house. After Mass there were three baptisms of infants (See the baptism register page 1). [Mary Ann Smith, daughter of Leonard and Mary Ann (Ginder) Smith, born January 5, 1837]. The two children of Charles Linn and Catherine (Notoff) Linn, William, born on February 17, 1835, and Caroline, born March 3, 1837. The work on the canal having then already begun. On the following day, Mr. Deydier, accompanied by Mr. Joseph Fisher, a mason and a German but who could make himself understood in English, rode a small distance up the canal to ascertain whether there were Catholics at work there.

Upon entering the first shanty or hut, they proposed some questions to two females who were then the only persons about the place but they did not seem much inclined to give any information about Catholics, against whom they at that time entertained very unfavorable prejudices, although since then one of them has been baptized and the other, it is confidently hoped will also join the Catholic Church.

After riding a few miles farther no Catholics were found but one Irishman and his daughter perhaps 13 or 14 years old, who promised to come to Mass on the following Sunday, a promise however which they did not fulfill and there was an end put to further researches on the line of the canal it being supposed that Irish laborers had not as yet in any considerable numbers come upon that public work.

On the following Thursday Mr. Deydier took leave of his new hospitable friends to return to Vincennes.

A change having taken place with regard to the appointment of several missionaries, the congregation of Evansville was a few times visited by the Reverend Mr. Benoit, who nevertheless was soon relieved from the care of the Evansville congregation in order to devote his labors to the congregation of Rome and of the neighborhood in consequence of which arrangement, Mr. Deydier was again sent by the Vicar General to Evansville in order to establish there a permanent mission.

Mr. Deydier arrived this second time in Evansville on the 17th of November, 1837, or thereabouts. There until about the middle of January, 1838, he made the house of Mr. Linck his home, when not absent upon a missionary excursion, and it is with the greatest pleasure and gratitude that he speaks thus much of the polite and charitable attentions bestowed upon him during his residence in that kind family.

Nevertheless, as it would have been too great a burden to impose upon one single family the whole charge of supporting the pastor and as it was most necessary on the other hand that people should have a free and easy access to him, he thought it best to cause a small room, 15 by 12 feet, to be constructed for his lodging, adjoining a small house in lot 240 bounded by the canal and Chestnut Street. Permission to put such a room was most cheerfully granted by Mr. Charles Linn whose wife and children were Catholics, upon condition that the Reverend Mr. Deydier would have for three years the use of that room rent free and that at the expiration of that time it should be left to the owner of the lot. This is to take place on the first day of January of the year eighteen hundred and forty one, the occupation of the room having begun in January of the year eighteen hundred and thirty eight.

Not being able to procure a decent place to perform the Divine Service, Mr. Deydier was obliged to make use of his own room for that purpose, at least, on week days when he was not absent on missionary visits; to obviate all those inconveniences steps were taken almost from the beginning of Mr. Deydier's residence in Evansville, to procure funds for the building of a church. But this building could not take place until a lot of ground was procured. Accordingly a subscription list was opened both at Evansville and in the neighboring sections of the canal at the head of which stood the name of the Right Reverend Dr. Bruté first for \$100 which he afterwards increased to \$300 for the purchase of a lot and the building of the church.

Notwithstanding all these efforts, nothing of consequence was attempted until the 19th of March, 1838, when preparations were made to go in the woods and cut the large timber necessary for the frame of the building, which operation was carried on the following day, but on account of very serious difficulties no lot to build upon was secured up to this day April the 1st, 1838.

Early in September, 1838, the Reverend Mr. Deydier, at the desire of the Right Reverend Bishop Bruté started for the eastern cities, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, in order to try to raise money to build the contemplated church. The success was not adequate to the exigency of age; but having returned in the spring of 1839 with a young Irishman, Michael Byrne, whom he had met with in Baltimore and who consented to keep school with a view particularly to instruct the children of the congregation, he bought in the fall, Lot number 111 for the price of \$1,200 of which he paid \$400 down, the rest being due at this date, November 10, 1841.

Early in the spring of 1840, preparations were made for the making of 200,000 bricks for which the Right Reverend Celestine de la Hailandière, who had succeeded in the See of Vincennes the Right Reverend Simon Bruté, who died the preceding summer, gave the sum of \$1,000 in addition to what had already been given by his predecessor. The bricks were made of good quality and delivered upon an adjoining lot. On the 5th of August, the

festival of St. Mary ad Nives, the cornerstone of the Assumption was solemnly laid by the Right Reverend Bishop Janson of France. Bishop Janson dressed in the pontificals accompanied with the clergy, who consisted only of the pastor, Reverend A. Deydier, and his assistant, Reverend Mr. Roman Weinzoeplen and also the oldest missionary in the western country, the Very Reverend Mr. Badin, came down processionally preceded by the cross borne by Mr. Byrne and the censor, from the upper story of an old house which had been hired for the use of divine worship, to the place where church was to be built. After the ceremony of blessing the cornerstone, the Very Reverend Mr. Badin delivered a long address which tended very much to soothe the prejudices of those who were not acquainted with the principles of Catholics. Afterwards pontifical mass was celebrated upon an altar decently adorned and the numerous congregation attending under a large harbor of foliage which was constructed chiefly by the exertion of the German and Irish Catholics. The Reverends A. Deydier and Roman Weinzoeplen assisted the Bishop as deacon and sub deacon, being each of them dressed in the vestments proper to the order he exercised. A collection of \$150 was made on the spot to which the Right Reverend Bishop Janson added an equal sum which put in the treasury \$300. With this collection in hand only the building of the church began on the 8th of September, 1840.

Father Deydier was a very humble priest and did not describe his own living conditions in the account above. During the early days of the Catholic church in Evansville, two people wrote personal observations of Father Deydier in their journals and letters. Mother Theodore Guerin wrote in her journal of her arrival in Evansville on her way to establish the Sisters of Providence in Terre Haute, Indiana.

At Evansville we saw the Ohio for the last time on Sunday evening, October fourth [1840], at the setting of the sun. Nothing troubled the charm and silence of this solitude. Making the most serious reflections on what we beheld, and on our present position, I said to myself: Thus does life also pass away, now calm, now agitated, but at least the end is attained...Our happy feeling soon gave place to considerable depression on account of a sight which we had believed would increase our joy. It was the condition of a missionary priest and a conversation with him. He is under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Vincennes and has evangelized this section of the country. So extreme was his poverty and so complete his destitution, that I shall run the risk of being accused of exaggeration in describing it; yet there is nothing in my narrative but which I have seen and touched. I shall relate it. The priest is about twenty-eight years of age. [In reality, Father Deydier was 52 years old.] His exterior bespoke mildness and he seemed refined;

but he was so poorly clothed that one would easily have offered him an alms. He had on an old torn coat, shoes in the same conditions, trousers all patched up by himself. The collar of his shirt, which was in rags (excuse the expression), hung around his neck. All this was so striking and seemed so strange that I could not forbear telling him that his housekeeper was not very tidy. In a mild tone he answered that a servant was the last thing they stood in need of in this country. "What!" said I, "You have no housekeeper? Who then does the housework, makes your beds, prepares your food?" He replied, "My companion and I eat only corn-bread, which is brought to us every day by a baker. We have only a log hut for our church, house, and school. At night we spread a mattress on a bench and there, wrapped in our coverings, we take a little rest. When we are away on missionary duties, and one or the other always is, we sleep on hay or straw or sometimes under a tree.

In her third journal, Mother Theodore Guerin describes coming to Evansville again.

We were taken by a Catholic lady to the priest's house. He was absent, but we pushed open a door and entered a room, if room it could be called, about eight or nine feet square. An unpainted wooden chest served as a table. The good lady showed me the inside of it. There I beheld the bed of the servant of God, Reverend Anthony Deydier. We may indeed consider his bed as his tomb and his life a continual death. Before the church was built he offered the Adorable Sacrifice on the same board. A few books (English and French), a wooden chair, and a little stove constituted the furnishings. On the stove was a cast-iron pan in which he baked his corn bread, his only article of food and of which he partakes only once day. Such is the penitential life that he has led for several years – this Apostle of Evansville – and yet he is happy! He has made several conversions among the Protestants. The mother of one of our dear novices, the Catholic lady who took us to his house, was one of his converts. He desires greatly that the interior of his poor church might be ornamented a little. We shall try to help him as, thanks to our dear brothers in France, we are now almost rich in devotional items.

Another description of the life of Father Anthony Deydier was given by Father Joseph Kundek to Eduard Vinzenz Milde, Archbishop of Vienna, Austria. In his letter dated January 2, 1839, Father Kundek wrote:

Accordingly, from here I advanced through Princeton to Evansville, where indeed on every side are dwelling somewhere around 30 German families. They even have a priest, but he is French. This man, on account of the lack of a missal, carries on the divine service in the Protestant manner. Since I came upon many English and Irishmen professing the Catholic faith, I first spoke in the English language in my sermon. Then I directed myself to the Germans, whom, to the best of my ability, in energetic German and in a comforting manner I encouraged toward perseverance and a constancy in their faith. And then with litanies and other prayers of the church I concluded the mission in the

makeshift chamber of the missionary who was away collecting Apostles in his zeal and by the example he sets. Bread with water, and, now and then, potatoes are his customary food and drink. And mind you – a French missionary! An example to his race.

On July 17, 1839, Father Kundek wrote another letter to Archbishop Milde informing him of the death of Simon Bruté, the first Bishop of Vincennes. He described his arrival in Evansville in a slightly different manner.

To my sorrow I learned that I should not be able to read Mass the following day, which was Sunday, as the resident pastor, Father Deydier, a truly learned and apostolic missionary, had taken the missal and vestments with him on a journey undertaken through the surrounding territory to collect funds for the building of a church. But since more than 30 German families reside in this town and its vicinity, I could not forego the opportunity of conducting services in the manner of non-Catholics, thus satisfying the congregation, composed of German and English speaking members, by first preaching in English and then in German, concluding the services with the Litany of the Blessed Virgin and other prayers of the Church. I did all this with a heavy heart, for although many had gone to confession they were unable to receive Holy Communion because there were no consecrated particles. But the will of God has been done, and the mission brought spiritual consolation to many, though held in a wretched room, the dwelling of the above-mentioned God-fearing priest, who like his predecessor lives on bread and water, or at most on potatoes.

The Diocese of Evansville is fortunate to have these historic documents to learn the struggles of not only the early Catholic church in Evansville but also of the residents of Evansville and its first pastor. The Diocese has come a long way in the last 180 years. Father Deydier, Mother Theodore Guerin, and Father Kundek would be proud of our advancement and the role they played in the early development of southwestern Indiana's Catholic church.

Sources:

Assumption Catholic Church Baptism Records, Microfilm Collection, Willard Library, Evansville, Indiana.

Sister Mary Theodosia Mug, *Journals and Letters of Mother Theodore Guerin*, (Sisters of Providence, 1937), 52-53, 167-168.

Norbert Krapf, *Finding the Grain*, (Indiana University Printing Services, 1996), 27, 31.